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MIKE



The Cutting
of a...
Slum
Diamond



M. B. WILLIAMS.

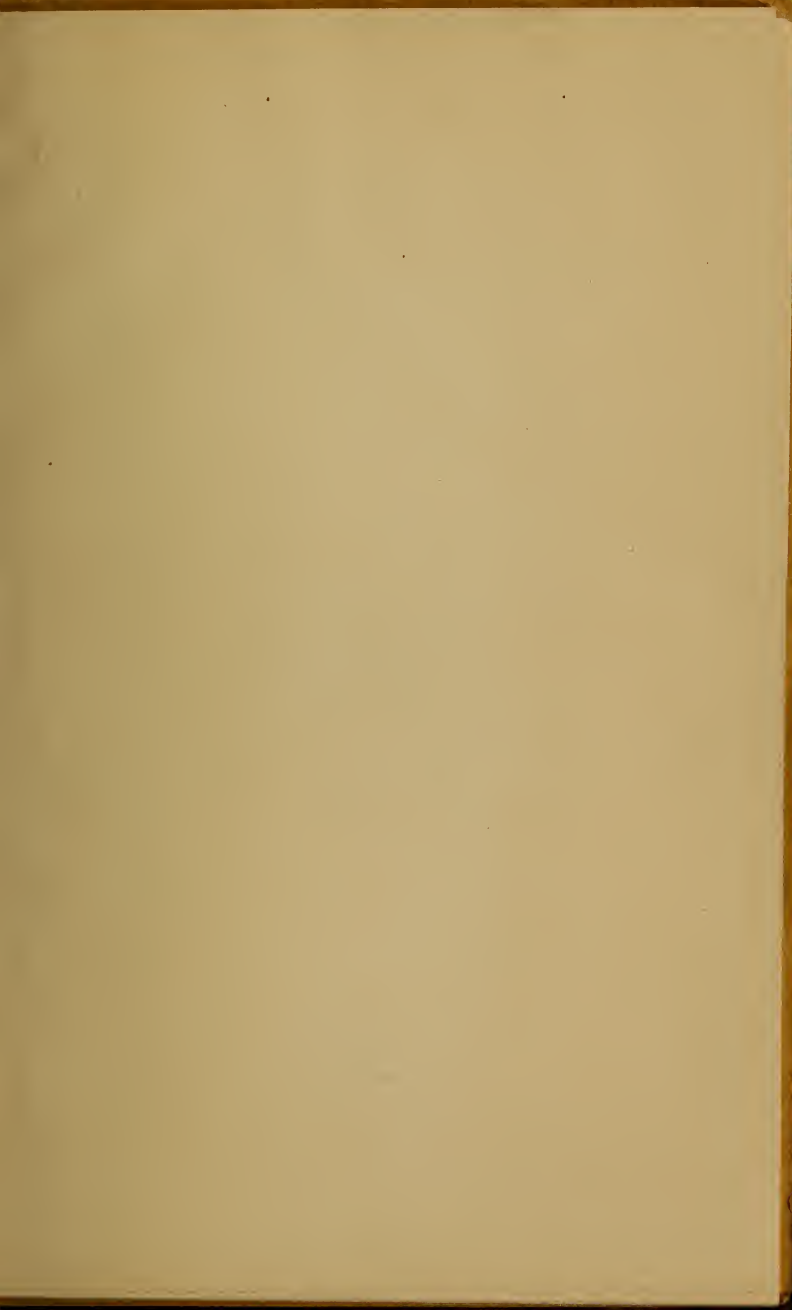
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MIKE

OR THE CUTTING OF

A SLUM DIAMOND

By M. B. WILLIAMS

*Author of "Among Many Witnesses," "Words for
the Anxious," "Where Satan Sows his Seed,"
"Best Text for Soul Winners," etc.*

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INTRODUCTION

Many times after telling this little story in one of my sermons I have been urged to put it in print, either in tract or booklet form, but have never written it until now. I have heard of several versions of it in different papers, written by those who had listened to the recital. It may please the reader to know that this story is not simply founded on fact—it is a fact. The work mentioned as being done in the gospel tent was done under the auspices of the Moody Bible Institute in the years of their tent evangelization. It was through Mr. Torrey, its superintendent, that I was induced to spend that summer in Chicago tent work. Miss Susie Poxen was then working with the Institute, and she is the teacher to whom reference is constantly made and who led Mike to Christ. Merely a touch of color here and there has been added to lend interest to the scenes as they are described; but it truthfully shows what can be done with a slum boy, through the servants of Jesus filled with His Spirit.

M. B. W.



MIKE

I

"Hi there!"

The speaker was not an orator; he was not even a man; he was only a street boy, but in one respect at least he resembled a man, for he was fearfully and wonderfully made.

"Is that tent fur a circus?"

But before I could make answer, another gamin of the street had replied, with startling force—"Naw."

"Wot is it, thin?"

"A church."

A half dozen boys volunteered this information, and it was apparently sufficient, for the questioner had made a wry face, and with several gyrations and contortions, hardly to be called elegant, had disappeared, causing no small laugh among the smaller boys and girls representing the genus gamin, which largely predominated in the crowd of spectators.

A circus! Many a time I had heard that question asked, not by the street children of a great city, but by the boys and girls, and sometimes the men and women of interior towns, as they would gather around the newly erected canvas or watch the workmen putting up one

of our magnificent canvas tabernacles for union meetings.

I looked at the newly erected canvas over the way; then I looked at the surroundings and pondered. How do I happen to be here? what possible good can be accomplished, even with the gospel, among this "submerged tenth"? But I had thought and prayed over it for weeks and had decided to come as an experiment—and at last I am here.

I am to preach in the slums of a great city. The work to me was as novel as it was new. I had asked for a place where no one else would care to go, but where, while I tried an experiment, I might at least be sure of doing good; and the present location of the canvas decided me that I had found all my suggestion implied. Yet I looked on with many misgivings, and again asked myself the questions: "What can be accomplished here?" "What, indeed, that will be permanent?" "What results can be obtained that will remain after the tent has gone?"

I was in one of the dark plague spots of Chicago—one of the breeding places of crime. Surely, a hatchery of iniquities and a fine culture medium for all varieties of devilment and sin. Not far away in one direction was "Little Hell." A few steps in the opposite direction was South Halsted Street, with its great

mass of festering wickedness and corruption. A few blocks to the north, the old Haymarket and headquarters of the anarchists.

I had just passed by the monument erected in memory of the murdered policemen, slain by the exploding of a dynamite bomb. It was Sunday afternoon, July 4, 1892. Recent and continued rains had caused the mud and dirt to be aggressively apparent, even in Chicago's streets; and this precinct had not been remarkable for its sweetness. A dead horse had been waiting for a drayman for many a long hour in an alley not far away. It, too, was becoming aggressive in its impatience. A muddy pool at the rear of the tent had swollen until it had become a pond. An army of small, one-garmented children had taken possession, and had formed rafts from posts, old gates and broken timber, which they were floating and poling from bank to bank.

What looking children some of them were! What strange garments they wore! The abbreviated skirts of the girls and rare remnants of cast-off clothing uniquely fastened in various ways to various places scantily covered the forms of both boys and girls. Every now and then one would lose his or her footing and slip from the unique craft into the muddy waters—which accident would be followed by shouts loud and long, mingled with curses, not always

loud, but deep. Modesty, of which the quantity was sometimes indicated by a minus sign, was forgotten. Oaths were heard from girls as well as boys, and the rough expressions used were shocking even to a masculine ear.

Poor little gutter-snipes! To them this was the joy of life. To them it was an earthly paradise. This filthy pond was their river of life, and perhaps as near as some of them would ever get to heaven. Handicapped from birth for life's race, the hot blood of passion and alcoholism poured into their beings by vicious and ignorant parents, turned loose to run with every dog in street and alley, amenable to but two laws, and those the Survival of the Fittest and the law of Reversion to Type—the type itself largely degenerate—what could be expected in the new generation? Heredity, birth, culture and education all tending to make, not useful citizens, but criminals and adepts in vice. The gospel or the penitentiary? the law of God or the reform school? To one of these must they look for help.

Just back of the tent a company of men were pitching quoits. Some of these were evidently workmen, while others were professional loafers. They played for beer to make the game more interesting, for it was Fourth of July. Money was plenty, times flush; and who would rob a poor man of his beer? especially on the

Fourth of July. So they continued to play, to swear and to drink. A long line of cans or "growlers" were being "rushed" by men, women and children, but especially children—and it seemed to me more especially girls—from a hundred open grog shops; sometimes from front door and sometimes from rear, back to their wretched homes.

Now and then the sound of an incipient brawl would be heard through shattered window or attic flat, on one side or the other; for the beer was doing its work and the glorious Fourth was to be truly celebrated. Fire crackers and other explosives were being fired in every direction; they were thrown over and under the canvas; they were thrown at every passer-by. It was hard to understand how such wretched buildings could escape the fire. As night came on these increased in variety, and an occasional rocket would be fired; but above everything else, poverty, vice and crime were evident on every hand. Simply the natural spawn of the saloons and rum shops of various grades that infested the district. The liquor dealer alone seemed well-to-do, and he was most numerous. On Halsted Street almost every building seemed to have a saloon above or below. Pool rooms and dance halls, gambling rooms—wide open. No more sign of the holy Sabbath day than would be ob-

served in Central Africa or China. Was it here that I must spend a month? here that I must preach? to this crowd that we must both preach and sing the gospel?

But I am not to tell the story of that month's work with its failures and successes, though it would make an interesting volume. We found some good helpers even in that neighborhood, and years afterwards, converts from those services sought us out in other parts of the city and in other cities, coming many miles to attend our meetings and tell us of the new life begun in that most hopeless place. I am simply to tell the story of Mike—only one of the many interesting cases of the month.

II

When a godly woman gives her life to Christ, offering to spend its strength among the children of the slums, He never leaves her in her efforts. Such was the one who held children's services four afternoons each week in our tent. Out and in among these surroundings of wickedness and vice, like a heavenly messenger, she came and went, gathering up the boys and girls; and with her tender way and kindly winning manner, inviting them to come.

They came—all types and classes—some because they had nothing else to do; others out of curiosity; others because her face, her words,

the songs, the meeting in the cool and pleasant tent were like a ray of heavenly sunshine in their darkened lives.

One day she came to me with a sad face and clouded brow. "There is one boy who is almost spoiling our children's meeting," she said. "What shall I do with him?"

"Why, don't allow it; throw him out if you can't make him behave," I replied.

"Oh, yes, I could throw him out, but I don't like to do that after I have asked him in. I want him saved for Jesus."

"Who is he and what is he?"

"His name is Mike."

That didn't convey much information, however, as most of them were either Mikes or Micks; but when she began to describe him I recognized him at once. Long and lank, he looked a trifle overgrown. He was a two-garmented, one-gallused boy. His two garments consisted of a checkered shirt, much stained and badly soiled, and a pair of trousers, fringed at the bottom. The legs of the trousers were of unequal length—one being drawn up nearly to his knee, the other not so far; for Mike was modest and would hide the fringe; he hated any such fastidious display. A sort of suspender, fastening at the left front, crossing the right shoulder and fastening somewhere at the back with a nail, held up in part these much

worn trousers. His large, dirty feet seemed almost webbed; his hands would match them nicely, while his face would do to cut up for trimming, the shade was so similar. His red hair had been treated to a home-made cut—little hills and valleys, blood red, told of carnage and marked the progress of the fray. His mouth was large to ugliness, save when he laughed, and then one wondered how so great a change could come so quickly. His ears were large and flat; his eyes so crossed you would think that if he cried the tears would all run down his back. But he was as bright as he was bad, and sharp as he was ugly.

“He came in turning somersaults the first time he attended,” she continued, “and I thought he would surely break up everything in the tent. He sits down by the little girls and smiles at them, which always frightens them and makes them cry. If my eye is off him for an instant he does some horrible thing.”

Her voice was trembling, and again I said, “Don’t allow him to spoil your meetings; I know him well. Twice each night he has to be thrown out of the tent. We throw him out on one side and he goes around and comes in on the other. Then we throw him out there. He is an awful boy. I saw him the first day we came.”

"Hi there," he had shouted, "is this tent fur a circus?"

Bound not to be disappointed, he was doing his best to convert it into a circus or the nearest possible approach thereto.

At my answer her lip quivered and her eyes were wet with tears. "Yes, I could throw him out, of course, but I thought maybe you could advise me how to save him and—help me pray for him."

I replied, "Y-y-es, I'll try." I freely confess, however, that my faith never removed the mountains between that boy and his Lord, but she prayed and worked on.

III

I got the story in chapters from her lips as the days passed by. One day she said, "I think the change is coming. I prayed so hard, 'Lord, give me Mike;' and finally I hit upon a plan. He was bothering me more than usual that day, when I said 'Mike,' and he rolled that twisted eye defiantly and mockingly at me. 'Mike, I need an assistant—some one to help me in the meetings—to give out cards and papers, and you are the biggest boy I have. It seems to me you ought to be my assistant here.'"

Mike rolled up that eye with a new expression, an expression of wonder and in-

credulity. He of all boys to be the teacher's assistant!

"You are big enough to help me keep order and do everything of that kind."

The eye snapped with a new light and a strange fire. Found him at last where he lived—to keep order. How that face brightened, as thoughts of enforced submission and many a lively scrap to come kindled joys in his heart that nothing else could have done!

"If your hands were cleaner you might distribute the picture cards to-day; and there is some water in the pail behind the platform. You will find a cake of nice new soap there, too. If you can get a little boy to help you, perhaps you can make them do for to-day."

She had hardly said it before he had a small boy by the collar and had taken him over a bench and around the platform, while between the trickling and the splashing could be heard Mike's hoarse voice commanding the trembling small boy—"Pour." And he poured. He found a piece of newspaper and used it for a towel; then he presented himself, holding up his hands. He had hastened much, perhaps fearing that another might be called to take the coveted place.

"They are not quite dry enough, I am afraid," said the teacher.

"Oh, I can fix that all right," said he, and

sought what would have been the secret recesses beneath the skirts of his coat—had he worn one—and rubbed vigorously. Producing the lost members he held them up again and asked, “How’s that? I can rub them drier if that won’t do.”

“No, no, Mike, I think they will do,” said his astonished teacher. “Give out the cards now—one to each child, no more.”

He was gone. Down the aisle he was passing them out, and in his hoarse voice to the child who dared to ask—like the historic Oliver—for more, loftily replied, “No, ye can’t have but one. Be still and don’t disturb the meetin.”

It was a risky experiment, but it worked. When he had finished he came and sat down on the front seat waiting patiently for further orders. Directly the meeting was dismissed he disappeared, but the next day he was there, and prompt among the first arrivals, and when he presented himself he proudly showed his hands. They were washed in advance, and clear up to his wrists at that; and his face—well, he had neither mirror nor towel, but he had washed out a big place like an oasis in a desert; bounded on the north by a dirty brow, on the east and west by two dirty ears, and on the south by a grime-stained chin and neck. But, as he could not dry his face as he had

dried his hands, the desert was irrigated by dirty little streams that had cut out gulches in the rich alluvial deposits on the borders. It was an improvement, however, and he came with a bound and somersault to show them off.

"That is quite an improvement, Mike," said the kind-hearted teacher. "Now you may take charge of the papers and you may assist me in keeping order to-day. You are the biggest boy in the meeting." Mike winked and bowed his acknowledgments, and forthwith installed himself as "Chief of Police," and seemed to the manor born. And woe betide the small disturber of the peace! Mike's iron hand was on him, and Mike's crooked eyes seemed looking everywhere at once, but it was serious business in spite of his aggressive zeal. A change had surely begun in the boy. He was a part of the meeting indeed from that time on. Little by little I noticed a change in him at night. He was thrown out no more now, but kept his seat respectfully each time until service was over. Little by little new garments replaced the old and soil-stained rags that he had worn when first I saw him. He always seemed watching for something to do. Like others of his ilk and those in higher life, he was restless without employment, and Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do. Each day at the close of the

children's meeting, he could be seen carrying his teacher's bag to the car, and standing until she disappeared from view. No one dared to throw a bad potato or offer her any indignity from ambush; Mike had his eyes open and she was in his charge. His honor was being aroused. Perhaps his heart was touched and he was at least converted to his teacher.

IV

It was one of those burning, scorching days that Chicago dreads so much. The mercury had steadily risen in the thermometers since early morning. Little crowds collected around the down-town bulletins watching for the number of sunstrokes reported. The oldest inhabitant tried in vain to recall a hotter time, and the regular habitués of the Tribune corner shook their heads and said that this meant mischief, and then hastened on to shelter. Eighty-five strokes the day before, and many deaths! To-day threatened to break the record. Those who could raise a nickel took the cars and found a cool retreat in some green park or shady nook, but the parks were too far away for the slum children, and only a few could find the car-fare there and back. Men and horses dropped in the street. Laborers came down from buildings and scaffoldings to go up no more. Sickly babes gasped for breath, and

stretched their bony fingers up and out for help, too weak to cry. *Câches* in the parks were full; and yet there were many more who suffered. Coiling spirals of heat rose up from flagstones and paving. Dogs ran wild-eyed with lolling tongues, and some with frothing mouths went mad. The discord of harsh voices and frightened cries—then the bang, bang, of a policeman's pistol told the sequel of the story. When the sun should set and night come it would be little better in the slums. No breath of air would be stirring; roofs would be covered with gasping crowds who would try in vain to sleep; while in Dago alley, ten, twenty and sometimes thirty would be packed in one small, stifling room with no roof on which to lie.

We often think with pity of the poor in winter time when blizzards blow, and the mercury falls below the zero mark; yet there are always kind hearts and ready hands at such times to send clothing and fuel; but no hand can relieve them in the long days and nights of summer heat. Oftentimes they suffer more in July or August than in midwinter.

Tired, sick and faint, the teacher left her car and turned toward the tent. "Why? What is this?" Something unusual, which evidently attracted her attention. A little cavalcade of boys and girls—but what are they up

to? Mike led the van, and in his hand a pitcher. After him a little fellow with a cup, cracked and yellow. Another held a huge spoon. A little girl carried a piece of ice wrapped in a paper. Another a twisted wad of newspaper containing sugar. Then one more, carrying a lonesome looking little lemon.

Mike, of course, was the spokesman: "Teacher, it's so hot that we thought you'd be thirsty, so we're goin' to set 'em up; we're goin' to stand the lemonade."

"How nice of my children to think of me this hot day! Well, come, let us go into the tent and make it." And they all sat down in the sawdust under the shadow of the big canvas.

"Children," said the teacher, "I know how to make lemonade too; won't you let me help?"

"Yes," said Mike, "yer can help," with a strong emphasis on the last word, for he was jealous of his task.

Then she looked at the little, eager, dirty fingers and said in her heart, "Lord Jesus, I can do anything for Thee—almost—but I must squeeze the lemon for myself." "Children, let me squeeze the lemon and you may do all the rest." Then she did her part while they talked and stirred and poured, after which Mike filled the cup to the brim and handed it to her. Then she closed her eyes and drank it. Mike took back the cup and looked in to be sure it was empty.

"Then what do you think he did?" said she.

"I don't know; what did he do?"

"Well, he just put his head down in that sawdust and turned one of those characteristic somersaults."

"That was his way of showing his appreciation because you drank his lemonade."

"Yes, I know it. I understand boys pretty well, and do you know, I believe something more is going to come of all this."

She was no false prophet and the sequel will tell what it was.

V.

"You know to-morrow is our last day in this location." It was the teacher who was speaking to me.

"Yes, why?"

"Well, we have a little surprise for you. Will you come down to our children's service?"

"Certainly."

"I have something that will interest you about Mike. To-day, when all the rest had gone, he stayed as usual to see me on the car. He has been so kind and attentive lately to my every little want; he has seemed even to anticipate them. Not one particle of trouble has he made me, but has seemed to feel his responsibility and recognize the fact of his usefulness. To-day I saw my opportunity and before we

left the tent I said: 'Mike, you have been such a help to me lately—so kind and good. You have changed wonderfully in the past four weeks and I appreciate it all so much, but, Mike, you have not really given your heart to Jesus yet; have you?'"

His head had fallen on his breast, and in a low tone he replied, "No'm."

"Why don't you do it, my boy?" and she stood looking down at him, her yearning heart of love beaming and shining in her eyes.

"How could a feller hold out till the tent got back?"

"Why, Mike, Jesus is here just the same, whether the tent is here or not."

"Is he? I never saw Him."

"Now, Mike, you know he is; don't talk that way,"—hardly able to suppress a half smile at the boy's quick wit and drollery. "You know, there are churches and missions where you could go. Mike, Jesus loves you. He died for you and He wants you for His own. Won't you let me lead you to Him before I go? Oh! Mike, I have prayed for you and yearned for you so! It does not seem to me I can leave this place unless I know you are truly converted to Him. Do get down on your knees and tell Him all about it. God says, 'Come. Let us reason together!' Ask Him for what you want just as you would ask any

friend, and He will grant it. Jesus is as willing to save you as anybody in all the world if you will let Him. 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever'—remember, Mike, whosoever, that means you—'believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' Won't you, Mike?"

He glanced up for an instant, looked into her face and overflowing eyes. There was now no impudent look in his face or eye, but rather, a strange look, as though a far-off memory had been stirred, as though a recess in his heart which he knew not of had been discovered, as though a life which he had scarcely dreamed of was opening up before him.

He waited only an instant and then, down on his knees by the bench he dropped and hid his face in his hands.

She quickly knelt by his side and placed her hand upon his shoulder. Then she prayed: "Oh! dear Lord Jesus, Thou Good Shepherd of the Sheep, fond, tender Shepherd, seeking after lost ones from the fold to-day, we believe you have found Mike. Out in the fields and on the hillsides of sin, broken, bleeding and wounded, torn with many a thorn—take him to-day in Thy loving arms, down close to Thy tender heart, and never let him go until he is

safe home at last. Keep him as the days go by when temptations come, for he may be tempted to swear and to steal and to drink and to gamble, and to forget Thee and this tent. Leave him not in temptation, but deliver him from all these evils for Thine own dear name's sake. Amen!"

"Now, Mike, pray for yourself."

"I never worked at that."

"Never mind, just tell what you want; don't be afraid." Her arm tightened about the boy's shoulder; her heart was yearning with love for that poor waif's soul. Then he tried to clear his throat and gather his voice while he prayed:

"Lord Jesus, I want to be a Christian. Forgive my sins. Make me a good boy. And help me to hold out till the tent comes back."

Then they arose. His cheeks were wet with tears. A little Testament was slipped into his hand, with words of counsel and a few marked passages. Jude: 24: "Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy." And 1 Cor. 10: 13: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye

may be able to bear it." Then this knight-errant of the streets escorted his teacher to the car and he was gone.

VI

It was the last day for the big tent in that part of the city. The afternoon service was on. I looked at the little expectant faces gathered there. What a change had come in those four weeks! Clean faces, clean dresses and hair brushed smoothly back.

"Not the same children you started with, I see."

"No, not quite the same."

But when I saw her smile I understood her meaning. The same, yet not the same, because changed by the grace of God. New children in Christ Jesus. I spoke a few minutes; so did the teacher. Then she said: "Now we will give the little surprise we have planned."

A crowd of little girls came up onto the platform and sang, "God be with you till we meet again."

How sweet their voices sounded! I certainly was surprised; but there were other surprises yet in store.

"Now we will have our farewell testimony meeting." A testimony meeting among these slum children! Ridiculous! But hark! What

is this? A little voice is saying: "I am glad of these meetings. I know I have been converted. I don't do and say things like I used to; and I pray to Jesus every morning and night." Another arose—"I know I have been converted, and my mamma and papa have too; they have burned up the cards, and they don't beat me any more, and we have such a nice time at home; and we have prayers every day." Another arose—"When I was converted, I went right home and asked my papa and mamma to come; they came at night and have given their hearts to Jesus, and I don't have to go after the beer no more."

One after another the boys and girls spoke. I found a choking in my throat. What a change! Last of all, Mike arose. He had a clean checkered shirt on, in pattern much like the tennis shirt I had put on for these services. A good pair of suspenders held a clean, cheap pair of cotton trousers in place. His hands and face were clean. But as he stood he found no place to put his hands. He was kicking the sawdust with his bare toes, saying, "Well, I was about the last one to be converted; but I'm glad I did, and hope I'll hold out till the tent gets back." Then he sat down. Some of the children smiled a little at Mike and his testimony, but he was not disconcerted.

Another song, a brief farewell word from the teacher, and the service was over. I had

seen my first month's work in the slums of Chicago. I went up and spoke to Mike, giving him some words of advice, and then strolled out, musing on the power of the gospel. But would it last?

VII

The following winter I saw the teacher in the Chicago Avenue Church one night. I at once inquired for Mike—had she seen him or had she heard of him? "Yes, I was on the street not many weeks ago, when I heard a voice calling, 'Teacher! teacher!' I looked around. A tall boy, in ulster coat, with cap drawn over his ears, held out to me a beautiful red rose, and, as I turned to take it from his hand, he said, 'I saw you passing and I thought you'd like it;' and before I could recover from my astonishment, before I could thank him, or had hardly recognized the boy, I got one glance from that twisted eye; and he had gone. It was Mike. I have not seen him since and I had not seen him before." But as I left that night the thought came back again and again to my mind: Though the tent has not returned, the boy, it seems, is still holding out to some extent.

VIII

Nearly two years had elapsed since the tent was first pitched in the city slums. Again I met the teacher. As we talked and brought

up reminiscences of other days, she asked, "Do you remember a boy named Mike, converted in your tent two years ago?" "Certainly, I have often told his story; do you know anything of him?" "Yes, I was walking down State Street a few days ago, when a young man stopped me, asking if I remembered him. I saw his eye; and then I said, 'Mike!' 'Yes.' 'How are you getting along, my boy?' For answer he pulled from his pocket the well-worn five-cent Testament that I had given him two years before, and handed it to me. It was marked and fingered from cover to cover. It was lined with pencil and thumb-marked. It was soiled and dog-eared. I looked it over; turned it from side to side and recognized it as one of the cheap Testaments that I so often give out; but when I looked over those well-worn leaves I could scarcely believe my eyes. 'Who did all this, Mike?' I asked. 'I did,' he proudly answered. 'Where do you go to church, and what are you doing these days?' 'Oh, I help down in the Waifs' Mission and anywhere that they need me.' "

Still holding out, still helping and waiting for the tent that never came.

IX

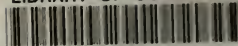
Mike's eye has since been straightened and

he has gone out from the great city into a smaller town to make his fortune. These lines may some day meet his eye and cheer him in his "holding out"; but often have I thought that when in my impatience I would throw him out, a woman's patient, Christlike love would hold him in; would hold him fast; would kindle in his heart a tiny spark; would fan it to a flame of heavenly fire; would see a jewel in his life—a diamond, uncut and rough, but still a diamond; would give her love, her strength, her time to cut and polish this strange jewel for the diadem of Christ, her King and Lord. And as I stop and think, I wonder if there are not many more slum diamonds yet unpolished and uncut that only wait for some dear soul with Christlike love to find them out; with Christlike patience, never thinking of failure; caring only for his soul; for no reward except to hear the welcome plaudit, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto me."

I sometimes wonder if at last, when worldly wood and hay and stubble which we build upon the faith we hold so dear, consume and leave us desolate—if these rare diamonds, so tenderly and patiently cut out, will not be all that is left of earth's long toiling in the temple of Eternity.



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